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# NUTRITION PROGRAM NEWS

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After more than 15 years' service to the programs of the Agricultural Research Service, Mary M. Hill retired on January 20, 1975. At the time of her retirement Dr. Hill was Staff Specialist for Nutrition Education and Head of Nutrition Programs Service, Consumer and Food Economics Institute. Her contributions as a researcher, as an author, and as a consultant are many.

One of Dr. Hill's responsibilities was the development and publication of Nutrition Program News. Under her guidance, this periodical developed into a tool for nutrition education that was of particular use to nutrition educators in community programs. Nutrition Program News will miss her suggestions and the timely articles she developed.

## New International Committee on Food and Nutrition Policy

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There is a growing awareness among professional workers concerned with food and nutrition that problems and programs in the United States cannot be understood in isolation from the rest of the world. It is not merely that the situation in the United States and policies pursued by our Government have an impact on other countries. We now know that the food and nutrition policies of other countries, the programs that they develop to implement those policies, and the degree to which they attain their program goals will determine how well the United States achieves national goals for good nutrition. Thus, the formation of an international Food and Nutrition Policy Committee as an advisory body to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations is an event of interest and concern to those persons in all countries who are responsible for nutrition programs and activities.

The background and purpose of the new committee described here are based on the FAO reports and other documents pertaining to the Food and Nutrition Policy Committee. I have then gone beyond these documents to identify several interdisciplinary issues that I believe the committee must consider. These pertain to national policies that are on subjects other than food and nutrition but that could conflict with food and nutrition policies. Because of these interdependencies, experts from several disciplines will be needed for the work of the committee. In identifying these issues, I have drawn on many sources, the most relevant of which are listed.

### BACKGROUND

Raising the levels of nutrition of people and ensuring humanity's freedom from hunger were major purposes in the establishment 30 years ago of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). In its efforts to accomplish this purpose, FAO has had the advantage of also being involved in programs to improve the efficiency of the production and distribution of food and agricultural products, better the condition of rural populations, and raise standards of living.

Over the years, FAO has designed and conducted many activities related to its goal of improving nutritional status. One activity has been the establishment of the Codex Alimentarius, a joint program of FAO and the World Health Organization covering the compositional, additive, contaminant, pesticide residue, hygiene sampling, and analytical aspects of foods. FAO has articulated the need for national nutritional policies and has developed guidelines to aid governments in the formulation of these policies. It has sent missions to countries to study needs and has aided in the development and implementation of programs to meet these needs—nutrition education, training for professional and lay workers, and studies of the incidence and causes of malnutrition, of food supplies, and of consumption. A basic approach used in these activities has been to focus the efforts of experts in nutrition, nutrition education, and food technology toward the solution of specific problems related to malnutrition.

A different approach was proposed at the 1973 FAO Conference (17th Session).<sup>1</sup> In a report on “A New Strategy for Improving Nutrition,” the FAO Food Policy and Nutrition Division (a subject matter division of the FAO headquarters staff) observed that nutrition problems do not necessarily require nutrition solutions, pointed out the weakness of attempting to treat nutritional problems in isolation, and called for better integration of food and nutrition objectives with national plans and projects. The report proposed extensive interdisciplinary planning as a basis for programs to achieve nutritional objectives.

The Conference agreed to this reorientation of FAO’s work in nutrition. It endorsed the idea of an integrated approach to nutrition problems, involving the various technical divisions of FAO and sister agencies, and stressed that a mechanism be provided to allow the Food and Nutrition Policy Division to play a coordinating role.

The idea of setting up a Committee on Food and Nutrition Policies was recommended by the FAO Conference. It was established by the FAO Council<sup>2</sup> on an *ad hoc* basis, in November 1973. This committee was to be a continuation of the former *ad hoc* Committee on Increasing the Production and Use of Edible Proteins, but with broadened terms of reference to cover the whole field of food and nutrition. The FAO Council (62nd Session, November 1973), in specifying the membership and terms of reference of the Committee, agreed that the Committee should be open to

all members of the Council and recommended that the Committee should not consist solely of nutrition experts, since the emphasis was to be on policy and the development of an integrated approach. The Council suggested that the agenda for the Committee’s first session include—

- (1) Definition of the Committee’s terms of reference.
- (2) Assessment of the World Food and Nutrition situation.
- (3) Consideration of a Nutrition Planning Scheme to develop an integrated approach and coordinate nutrition activities within FAO.
- (4) Implications for FAO’s work of the deliberations of the World Food Conference.

An additional item for the agenda was suggested by the November 1974 World Food Conference,<sup>3</sup> which recommended—

“That all governments and the international community as a whole, in pursuance of their determination to eliminate within a decade hunger and malnutrition, formulate and integrate concerted food and nutritional plans and policies aiming at the improvement of consumption patterns in their socio-economic and agricultural planning, and for that purpose assess the character, extent, and degree of malnutrition in all socio-economic groups as well as the preconditions for improving their nutritional status;

“That FAO, in cooperation with WHO, UNICEF, WFP, IBRD, UNDP and UNESCO, assisted by PAG, prepare a project proposal for assisting governments to develop intersectoral food and nutrition plans; this proposal to be communicated to the FAO Council at its mid-1975 session through its Food and Nutrition Policy Committee, and to the governing bodies of the other interested agencies.”<sup>4</sup>

The first meeting of the Committee on Food and Nutrition Policy will be held in Rome in June 1975.

<sup>1</sup>The FAO Conference, to which each member nation sends a delegation and has one vote, meets every 2 years and is the supreme governing body of FAO.

<sup>2</sup>The FAO Council, consisting of 42 of the 130 member governments, serves as the governing body between sessions of the Conference.

<sup>3</sup>A special intergovernmental conference at the ministerial level held under the auspices of the United Nations. The Economic and Social Council of the United Nations had over-all responsibility.

<sup>4</sup>The organizations referred to are, respectively: World Health Organization (WHO); United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF); World Food Program (WFP); International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD); United Nations Development Program (UNDP); United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); and Protein Advisory Group (PAG). All are part of the United Nations System.



## INTERDISCIPLINARY ISSUES

Aside from food and nutritional issues that have major policy implications, there are several interdisciplinary issues or concerns that are relevant to the work of the committee. While a nation's food and nutrition programs can and sometimes do operate independently from various other social programs, the likelihood of success is not independent.

Progress toward meeting food and nutrition goals depends in part on that nation's other social and economic policies, and in turn the success of other programs may depend on the food and nutrition policies. Other social and economic policies that must be considered include policies for national economic development; agricultural production and marketing; population control and family planning; functioning of individual households; and the role of women.

### Goals and programs for national economic development

Goals for improving the nutritional status of the population within a country may be both competitive with and complementary to goals for economic development.

On the one hand, nutritional goals and economic development goals may often compete for the limited agricultural and other resources within a country. For example, in countries with food shortages, progress on nutritional goals might be most readily achieved by a strategy that includes a critical analysis of food balance sheets and food consumption and diet surveys, and increased production or efficient distribution or both of foods which supply nutrients in short supply. However, economic development goals might require increased production of cash crops for export or for investment of resources in projects to increase income and national product rather than in production of food for local consumption.

In countries with ample food supplies to feed the population, poverty and the resulting inability of some households to buy sufficient food may be a major factor contributing to malnutrition. In this situation, a logical strategy for improving nutrition might involve redistribution of income. But income redistribution might reduce overall investment (by private households) contributing directly to economic development.

On the other hand, there is evidence that progress toward alleviating malnutrition may contribute to economic development by improving the productivity of the labor force and by reducing the drain on resources to care for the sick or disabled. Although the magnitude of this contribution may be debatable, experts seem to agree that there is some effect. Also, progress on goals for economic development may result in higher incomes and thus enable households to purchase foods needed for a good diet.

A major issue, then, is how to develop policies for nutrition and for economic development that are compatible with each other. Nutrition goals (and quantitative targets for improving nutrition) should be determined not only on the basis of the social value placed on adequate nutrition and the human, technical, and financial resources which could be mobilized by a nation for this purpose, but also on the basis of goals for economic development and their relationship to programs for alleviating malnutrition. The resolution of this issue requires input from economic, political, and other social scientists as well as nutritionists.

### Systems for agricultural production and marketing

The relationship between the means for enhancing the food supply through increased production and more efficient marketing and distribution and that for improving the nutritional adequacy of diets is similarly complex.

One obvious technological answer to the problem of feeding a growing population is increased emphasis on production of a few high-yielding varieties of food commodities, of a few foods of outstanding nutritive value, and of fabricated foods which contain or are fortified with specified amounts of nutrients. Yet many nutritionists have expressed concern about possible effects of replacing previous dietary patterns with diets which are limited to a few foods or which rely on highly processed, fabricated, or fortified foods for a substantial proportion of nutrients. In view of the limited quantity and sometimes ambiguous quality of the evidence concerning the effects of such dietary changes on the nutritional status of populations, caution is probably in order. Once a trend toward changes in dietary pattern is set in motion, that trend may be difficult to reverse.

Similarly, changes in marketing and distribution systems may be irreversible, from a practical point of view. For example, in many developing countries, much of the food supply is provided to households through a network of small entrepreneurs and small-scale enterprises. Strategies that emphasize substantial increases in agricultural production and in the production and consumption of processed foods (synthesized or fortified) are likely to require heavy investment and centralization. The result of such strategies is likely to be the disappearance of the network of small enterprises. Once these are gone, they cannot be quickly or easily re-formed should new systems of distribution prove unsatisfactory.

Some risk is necessarily involved in any given strategy for effecting changes in agricultural production, food technology, and marketing and distribution systems. Issues concerning how much risk is acceptable and justifiable can be resolved only by experts on all these fields of science and technology working together.

## Population

Basic to any quantitative targets for nutrition improvement is the consideration of the size of the population and the rate of population growth. If the nutritional target pertains to a population subgroup (infants and young children, mothers, households in the lowest low socio-economic strata, and so forth), then the size and rate of growth of that subgroup is pertinent. But population size and rate of growth depend on population policies and measures taken to control the rate of population increase in general or the size of any specific population subgroup.

Success in the attainment of targets for nutrition improvement will depend to a large extent on correspondence between actual and expected population magnitudes. In the general sense it may be true, as one economist concludes, that the concept of an optimum population has not been fruitful,<sup>5</sup> but in a more limited sense it is also true that lower rates of population growth and smaller numbers of people are more desirable from the point of view of achieving nutrition goals. Realistic food and nutrition policies require compatible population policies and programs for effectively implementing those policies.

## Family planning

Of equal importance are the family planning aspects of population policies and programs—the optimum number and spacing of children in a given family and measures for attaining the optimum. Relationships between number and spacing of children in a family and the probable nutritional status of mother and children are well known.

Child quality, as indicated by health status, intelligence, and other characteristics, is an explanatory variable used in some recent studies of fertility. Researchers have hypothesized that number and spacing of children in families may be related to desired child quality. Goals for achieving desired quality of children, of course, are partly dependent on achieved levels of nutrition of mother and of infants and young children. Therefore this aspect of nutrition policy needs consideration. It is reasonable that population policies, as well as food and nutrition policies, should take into account concepts of desired child quality.

Another issue concerns adjustments to programs for implementing food and nutrition policies in the event that population targets are not met. Should available resources be spread among the larger-than-expected population, with

the result that desired levels of nutrition are achieved for none, or should resources be directed in such a way that desired levels of nutrition are achieved by at least part of the population?

## Functions of the family

Most people live in families and receive most of their food as a member of that family. Food is acquired through the use of family resources—money and other tangible possessions, and the time, energy, and skill of family members. Food is stored in the household and prepared for consumption by family members. Thus, the household or family as a social unit performs many functions that directly or indirectly affect the nutritional status of its members.

Programs for the improvement of nutritional status of individuals are not likely to be effective if they disregard the important role customarily played by the family in controlling the quantity, quality, and variety of food consumption of individuals. It is relevant to take into account the patterns of family decisionmaking; the roles of family members with respect to acquisition, storage, and preparation of food and its distribution among family members. Not only may specific programs for nutritional improvement be ineffective if they are contrary to family customs and beliefs, these programs may have the unintentional effect of weakening or disrupting other family functions.

In deciding on specific programs for implementing food and nutrition policies, a basic issue concerns whether or not functions previously performed by families shall be taken over by some outside agency as a means for facilitating nutrition improvement. Food distribution programs, which provide meals directly to individuals partially (or wholly), substitute an outside institution for the family as a provider of food, both in terms of selection of diet and distribution of the household food supply among family members. Distribution of food commodities to families takes from the family some decisionmaking responsibility for selection of foods while permitting them to distribute it among members as they wish. Compared with income supplements, distribution of commodities or of food stamps partly removes from the family the decisionmaking responsibility for determining what proportion of income shall be spent on food. Nutrition education programs in schools are an assumption of the family's responsibility for teaching children good patterns of living.

For each of these approaches to nutrition improvement, there are alternatives which would not remove functions from the family or weaken family responsibility. Education programs can be directed toward improving diets in the family setting. Distribution programs can work with and

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<sup>5</sup>Schultz, T.W. The value of children: An economic perspective. *J. Political Econ.* Part II, 81(2): 2-13. 1973.







through the family to enable the family to function more successfully as a unit that provides food to its members. Which alternatives should be selected is a matter to be considered jointly by nutritionists and home economists and decided partly on the basis of governmental policy.

Few nations have explicitly formulated family policies that would indicate the value to be placed on the goal of preserving and strengthening the family as a social and economic unit, compared with other social, political, and economic goals. Such policies would prescribe which functions and decisions should be the sole responsibility of the family; which should be shared with or monitored by other social institutions (community, schools, health organizations, governmental bodies); which functions should be performed by other institutions but controlled or monitored by the family; and which functions should be denied the family either to perform or to control.

It would be desirable if every nation were to explicitly formulate family policies to guide governmental actions. However, the tendency of governmental actions (legislative, judicial, and administrative) taken as a whole implies a more or less consistent stance toward the role of families in society. For example, in some countries governmental actions limit the freedom of the family to determine the nurture and education of their children. In effect, socially determined minimum standards, usually based (or thought to be based) on scientific evidence, are imposed. When families are unable or unwilling to provide the specific kinds of care and educational experience to satisfy these standards, programs may be set up through schools or other agencies to provide the services that are lacking. Sex education and child feeding programs are instances. A consistent pattern of such actions would imply a policy of making socially accepted, scientific standards take precedence over the standards of individual families. Whether or not a government wishes to pursue such a policy should be considered in formulating food and nutrition policies.

## Role of women

Those who are concerned with the status of women have tended to advocate greater freedom for women from traditional family ties and responsibilities. They have emphasized the right (as they see it) of a woman to choose her way of life, to choose to work outside the home, to have an equal voice with her husband in choosing what functions she shall perform in the family, to limit the number of children she will bear, to assume leadership roles in governmental or community organizations.

But in actual practice, women often perform a gatekeeper function with respect to food consumption. Women have the sole or at least the major responsibility for the nurture and teaching of the very young. Thus within the limits of

her knowledge, motivation, and resources a woman determines whether the child is well or poorly nourished and whether the child is taught good or poor dietary practices. Also, women usually have the major responsibility for acquiring, storing, and preparing food for household members and for distributing to each household member his share of the food supply.

Strategies for nutrition improvement which rely on programs to inform wives and mothers concerning the importance of diet to the health of their families and to teach them how to provide nutritious meals are likely to reinforce traditional role assignments and thus conflict with programs intended to improve the status of women. Conversely, strategies for improving the status of women are likely, at least in the short run, to have adverse effects on the nutrition of family members simply because they release women of responsibilities formerly assigned to them as a matter of course, without developing alternative patterns for assigning and enforcing performance of these responsibilities. For the adequate nutrition of each family member it is not necessary that the wife be responsible for distributing the family food supply among family members so that each receives his share, but it is necessary that this function be performed.

Nutritionists and persons concerned with status of women need to consider these issues and attempt to develop policies and programs that are compatible. One approach would be to adopt strategies for improving the status of women in which major emphasis is on enhancing the prestige of functions usually performed by women, rather than on releasing women from responsibility for performing those functions. Whether or not such strategies would be effective cannot be known until they are tried. Adoption of such strategies would enable nutritionists, home economists, and those concerned with improving the status of women to work together in an effort to inform governmental policy makers and the general public of the importance of household activities to the well-being of persons and nations.

## Summary

Recognition of the interdependency and conflicting relationships between policies and programs to improve the nutritional status of populations and other policies and programs is an important first step toward developing an integrated approach to food and nutrition planning. But recognition alone will not solve problems. In order to design optimum policies, it will be essential to form interdisciplinary teams representing the relevant subject areas, to establish a basis for communication among these experts, and to encourage the development of workable compromises among various social, political, and economic objectives.

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